

In Maryland, Hurting Those Who Hurt Most

In times of budget crises and cutbacks, everybody hurts. Very few "painless" options exist to handle a shortfall in the essential services of government. In fact, that's why the budget planning process exists, so that what our governments spend reflects our citizens' social priorities. Some of the cutbacks in Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley's budget will lead to fewer matching federal dollars at the county level. With that deficit and the increased burden now on localities, reasoned and thoughtful budget strategies are more important than ever.

In that spirit, I would argue that the proposed cuts to county health and human services upset many of our long-term plans. Funding that takes a "breather" in fiscal 2008 might well never breathe again and disappear completely by 2009. During times of radical strains on budgets, there's wisdom in sticking to the basics. Dealing with both potholes and behavioral health are the basic investments in infrastructure we have to make. Superhighways and music venues cannot be community priorities when the vulnerable need our help and sometimes have no chance of receiving an adequate response from the state or federal government.

But according to the fiscal 2008 budget plan, "Care for Kids" loses a full \$250,000, while the county's public information needs are cut a scant \$27,000. Some treatment slots are cut, home care is cut, and housing subsidies are cut. The total hit to health and human services is more than \$4.5 million.

Studies show that the most cost-efficient and effective way to deliver mental health services is through community-based, coordinated programs.

Priority must be given to those results-based programs that have successful outcomes. And our county jail must no longer serve as the single biggest provider of mental health services.

A recent study by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration shows that only 20 percent of those in need of substance abuse treatment actually receive it. Research shows that every \$1 invested in addiction treatment can yield up to \$5 in savings to the community.

When the first major winter storm hits the Washington area, who will be on the street? Who will be standing behind the last person to be given a proper winter coat at a shelter whose shelves have gone bare? Who won't be treated and who might be injured an hour after the shift ends for the mobile crisis team that's not operating around the clock? Who will go without the intervention that could have prevented their death from the complications of alcohol or drug use?

These highly vulnerable citizens are not strangers. They are the neighbors, the babysitters, the workers we meet every day. They are the parents and grandparents and children of the constituents my colleagues and I represent on the Montgomery County Council. How we treat them (or ignore them) is a reflection of who we are as a county, and during the next few months of budget policy discussion, they should remain a primary concern.

— Duchy Trachtenberg

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